

“Who Ya Gonna Call?”

“I no longer call you servants, because a servant does not know his master’s business. Instead, **I have called you friends**, for everything that I learned from my Father I have made known to you” (John 15:15).
1 Samuel 17:57-18:4¹

Elon Musk is in the news quite a bit these days, usually having something do with his two best-known companies, Tesla Motors and Space-X. Musk is one of the very, very few people in the world who have started four distinct billion-dollar companies, and I’m among those who find his chutzpah and vision to be both challenging and inspiring.

At forty-six, Mr. Musk has pretty much everything money can buy, but he still describes himself as lonely. Divorced from his ex-wife and broken up with his girlfriend, Musk noted in an interview just before Christmas that “Being in a big, empty house, and with no footsteps echoing through the hallways, how do you make yourself happy in a situation like that?”

Then he added, “When I was a child, there was one thing I said over and over: ‘I never want to be alone.’” And then he whispered, “*I never want to be alone.*”² For all his billions, Elon Musk is still lonely.

Dr. Richard Schwartz is a Cambridge psychiatrist who has studied loneliness for four decades. Dr. Schwartz has noted that being lonely is linked to increased risk of cardiovascular disease, stroke, and the advancement of Alzheimer’s disease. One study found that loneliness can be as significant a risk factor to health as smoking is. In 2015, another study that had followed 3.5 million people for thirty-five years reported that loneliness and isolation increase the risk of premature death by 26-32 percent.³

Loneliness and a lack of a sense of belonging are significant factors that cause young men to join gangs or to become radical and violent in other ways; and the rise of social media has only served to make the problem worse. I’m sorry to tell you this, but *Facebook* friends are not friends in any real sense unless they were already face-to-face friends before that cyber-connection.

In order to combat loneliness, some hotels have started renting fish to their customers so there will be another living being in the room,⁴ and a company in Japan rents actors who will pretend to be anything from your baby to your grandparent. Ishii Yuichi, the CEO of this company, points out that “It takes years to create a strong human connection, and that involves a lot of hassle and disappointment. It’s just easier to schedule two hours a week to interact with an ideal boyfriend. There’s no conflict, no jealousy, no bad habits. Everything is perfect.”⁵ But you’re still ALONE.

Though we humans continue to need each other as much as ever, the University of Chicago released a study several years ago that revealed that Americans today have fewer people in whom we can confide than did past generations. In 1985, the average American had three people in whom to confide matters that were important to us. By 2004, that number had dropped to two. Perhaps even more striking, the number of Americans with no close friends rose

¹ A sermon by Dr. David C. Stancil, delivered at the Columbia Baptist Fellowship in Columbia, MD on April 22, 2018.

² Neil Strauss, “Elon Musk: The Architect of Tomorrow,” *Rolling Stone*, 11.15.17.

³ Billy Baker, “The Biggest Threat Facing Middle-Aged Men Isn’t Smoking or Obesity. It’s Loneliness,” *Boston Globe*, 3.9.17.

⁴ Andrea Romano, “This Hotel Rents out Goldfish to Lonely Guests Who may be in Need of Some Company for a Night,” *Business Insider*, 9.6.17.

⁵ Katrina Trinko, “Will Renting Friends be as Popular as Calling Uber?” *Acculturated* blog, 11.17.17.

from 10 percent in 1985 to 24.6 percent in 2004. If that survey is accurate, one out of every four of us says we have no close friends—zero, zilch, **none**.⁶ *One out of four*. Do I have your attention yet?

For many of us, the title of this sermon immediately reminds us of *Ghostbusters*,⁷ but the title is more serious than that. In most communities, fewer than half of the residents have any sort of a church relationship at all. This means that most of our neighbors have no one to call when grief touches their lives.

Most of our co-workers have few, if any, close friends. Most of the families with whom we travel to soccer tournaments and band concerts, most of the students we meet at school, and most of the people who repair our cars or serve us in restaurants have no place to learn about peace, justice, repentance, forgiveness, love, and grace.⁸ For most of our neighbors, the answer to “Who Ya Gonna Call?” . . . is nobody.

Now I expect that most of us in this room, if asked, would say that we have a lot of friends. I also suspect that what we really mean by that is that we have a lot of acquaintances—people we’ve met, and whose names we may know, but whom we don’t really know in any substantial or deep way. I suppose that there are many ways by which we might try to gain a more accurate notion of how many real friends we have; and I’m going to suggest a fairly simple one.

Most, if not all, of our cell phones have a feature called “speed dial.” This feature allows us to dial frequently-used numbers by pushing one—or at most, two—number keys. So as we think about friends this morning, I wonder who’s on your speed dial list? More particularly, I wonder who’s on that list *who is neither co-worker nor family?* Is there anybody?

How does someone become sufficiently important to you to get listed in your cell directory at all (I have 4,356), and how does someone become sufficiently important to you to get on your speed dial list (I have 8)? That’s what we’re going to wonder about together this morning.

Over the years, I’ve become fond of 1 Samuel 18:1, where we’re told that “*After David had finished talking with Saul, he met Jonathan, the king’s son. **There was an immediate bond of love between them, and they became the best of friends.***” The friendship between David and Jonathan is legendary, and it’s an illustration of those extraordinary friendships we sometimes call “best friends.”

While Jill is my very, very best friend in every way, I have the names of eight men written beside that verse in my Bible. These are guys are my “best friends” from nearly every chapter of my life, and these are guys who, if I called them and told them that I needed them, would be on the next plane to Baltimore—even if they’re not on my speed dial list at the moment.

While the idea of friendship is somewhat hard to define, one author noted that, “first and foremost, friendship is not instrumental.”⁹ That is, friendship is not about what someone can do for us, but about who we become when we’re with them. And that brings me to what is actually a very interesting theological idea.

⁶ Janet Kornblum, “Study: 25 Percent of Americans Have No One to Confide In,” *USA Today*, June 23, 2006.

⁷ <https://en.wikipedia.org/wiki/Ghostbusters>

⁸ Robert Schnase, *Five Practices of Fruitful Congregations* (Nashville: Abingdon Press, 2007), pp. 19-20.

⁹ Kate Murphy, “Do Your Friends Actually Like You?” *The New York Times*, 8.6.16.

I'm sure you remember that the Bible tells us that God is mysteriously both one Person and three Persons at the same time. There is only one God, but God has been revealed to us as both One *and* Three. The Reality—the Person—at the Center of all that is, is both Three-in-One and One-in-Three. On the one hand, “*the LORD our God, the LORD is One*”¹⁰ and on the other hand, and at the same time, God is somehow also Father, Son, and Spirit (Matthew 28:19).

Unpacking the idea of the Trinity isn't our purpose this morning; but one of many things that the idea of the Trinity means is that **being in relationship is at the very center of God's own Being as Three-in-One**. And because loving, personal relationship is at the very core of who God is, loving, personal relationship is at the very center of all that is. The Good News is that, in its essence, the universe is not indifferent to you. God IS, and God LOVES YOU!

And **because loving, personal relationship is at the very core of who God is**, the Bible makes it clear that God treasures loving relationships and wants the whole creation to be filled with them (1 John 4:7-21). Whatever else God intends to do in the universe as a whole, the Bible makes it clear that God's purpose on earth is to populate this planet with persons who of their own free will choose to join their lives together in a community of relationships that only God can build.

The Bible calls this remarkable group of people “*the household of God,*” or “the church” (Matthew 16:18; 1 Peter 4:17), and the Bible tells us that “*Christ loved the church* [His human family] *and gave himself for her to make her holy*” (Ephesians 5:25). In this respect, just before His crucifixion, Jesus told His disciples, “**I give you a new command: Love one another. Just as I have loved you, you are also to love one another. By this everyone will know that you are my disciples, if you love one another**” (John 13:34-35).¹¹

Now if we're not careful, we'll reduce this statement and this command to mere sentimental mush; and so, remember, if you will, to whom Jesus was speaking. His disciples were mostly fishermen, mixed in with a few turncoat tax collectors. These were salty, selfish, sweaty, swearing sailors, much like those guys in *The Perfect Storm*.

When Jesus told these guys to “Love one another,” He was not advocating sentimentality. He was commanding the kind of love that causes a man to “take a bullet” for his friend. He was commanding the kind of love that causes a soldier to fall on a grenade to save his comrades. This was not sentimentality. This was serious business . . . and it's still serious business today.

It took those guys a long time to learn how to love in the manly, world-changing way that Jesus commanded, and in the end, it cost them their lives, as it cost Jesus His. It takes that kind of brotherhood to change the world; and we only learn this kind of love in the company of the Carpenter who took the whips and the thorns and the nails . . . for us.

Now I haven't said it so far, but some of you have probably figured out that the underlying theme for this morning's message is the idea behind “first base” on our “baseball diamond”: FELLOWSHIP. Although our typical use of the word “fellowship” tends to refer to socializing, as at a church gathering of some sort, the word “fellowship” also means “to have in common,” “to partner in,” “to belong equally to,” or “to be comrades.”¹² That's why J.R.R. Tolkien used the

¹⁰ Deuteronomy 6:4, the *Shema*

¹¹ That's what was going on in this morning's text, too: *When David had finished speaking with Saul, Jonathan was bound to David in close friendship, and loved him as much as he loved himself* (1 Samuel 18:1).

¹² www.merriam-webster.com/dictionary/fellowship

word in his book, *The Fellowship of the Ring*.¹³ It is in this “Band of Brothers” sense that “fellowship” makes the most difference in our lives.

It’s interesting to me that in our text, Jonathan took his military tunic, his sword, his bow, and his military belt, and gave them all to David. These were symbols of friendship and brotherhood, but they were also the tools for battle, in which David’s later exploits became legendary.

I received a gift rather like that when we were in Ghana. Although several of us were new to Ghana and unfamiliar with the culture, I was the only paleface in the bunch, and I stuck out quite dramatically everywhere we went. And it was quite often the case, when we were out and about, that William Amonoo-Coleman chose to walk through the crowds as the last person in our group. He was walking behind me, in order that I might not get lost, be separated from the group, or become any sort of a target. Without saying a word, William “had my back.”

That was deeply moving to me, and that’s the kind of thing friends do for friends. I will remember many things about Ghana, but having William at my back will remain one of my strongest memories. Thank you, my friend.

Many have pointed out that we humans tend to greatly OVERestimate our capacity to handle life by ourselves, and we greatly UNDERestimate the power of friends (community) to help. When life falls apart, when we are overwhelmed, when we “crash and burn,” God doesn’t always provide us with answers, but God *does* always provide us with relationships—with God and with one another.¹⁴

Tradition has it that **Leonardo da Vinci defined an arch as two weaknesses that, by leaning on each other, make a strength.**¹⁵ That’s what friendship looks like.

Harvard University famously followed the lives of 268 men *for seventy-five years*, tracking an array of physical, psychological, and spiritual dimensions of their lives. Dr. George Vaillant ran this study for its final forty-five years, and in 2009, he was asked to summarize what had been learned from all those years of work.

We might have expected a complex answer, but Dr. Vaillant’s conclusion about human happiness was breathtakingly simple. Here’s how he summarized seventy-five years of social science research: “*The only thing that really matters in life are your relationships to other people.*”

Let me say that again: “**The only thing that really matters in life are your relationships to other people.**”¹⁶ That’s FELLOWSHIP. And that’s the answer to “Who Ya Gonna Call?”

Now if we in the church are the community, the fellowship, that God intends to use to transform the world—and we are—it’s crucial that we pay attention, not just to our relationships with one another, essential as that is. If we’re going to accomplish God’s purposes in the world, we have to be busy about inviting and including others into the fellowship that we have found.

¹³ https://en.wikipedia.org/wiki/The_Lord_of_the_Rings:_The_Fellowship_of_the_Ring

¹⁴ Robert Schnase, *Five Practices of Fruitful Living* (Nashville: Abingdon Press, 2010), p. 78.

¹⁵ Quoted by Jane Rubietta in *Marriage Partnership*, vol. 12, no. 2.

¹⁶ Joshua Wolf Shenk, “What Makes Us Happy?” *The Atlantic* (June 2009), pp. 36–53. This study, which began in 1937, was originally known as “The Harvard Study of Adult Development,” but is now known as “The Grant Study.”

It's quite often the case that persons who have become meaningfully connected to others in the fellowship of the church, and are therefore getting their own needs for community met, become less interested in and less committed to inviting and including others who are not yet so connected. Without really meaning to, we become a lot more like "Teflon" than like "Velcro." The idea of connection and fellowship tends to fall off of our "radar" once we ourselves become connected; and because this happens so easily, we need to encourage one another to "keep our Velcro on."¹⁷

You and I need to remind ourselves—and to remind one another—that we ourselves belong to the Community of Christ because somebody, somewhere, offered hospitality to us . . . and we need to pass it on. We need to continue to give our full attention to making others welcome. When we walk into this room, we need to look first, not for people we know, but for people we don't know . . . and we need to sit with them, befriend them, and make them welcome.

It seems to me that people come to church for many different reasons, but they only stay for one reason, and that reason is friends.

So after all this, when you think back to your speed-dial list, is there anybody on that list who is neither co-worker nor family nor church friend? Are there any non-work or non-family or non-church names on the back of your pocket calendar or phonebook? How are all those folks outside the fellowship of faith going to find what we've found if we don't tell them about it?

Who ya gonna call? Get your Velcro on!

¹⁷ See Samuel Shoemaker, "I Stand by the Door," attached to this sermon.

I Stand by the Door

- Samuel Moor Shoemaker -

I stand by the door.

I neither go too far in, nor stay too far out,
The door is the most important door in the
world—

It is the door through which [people] walk
when they find God.

There's no use my going way inside,
and staying there,

When so many are still outside and they,
as much as I,

Crave to know where the door is.

And all that so many ever find

Is only the wall where a door ought to be.

They creep along the wall like blind [persons],

With outstretched, groping hands.

Feeling for a door, knowing there must be
a door,

Yet they never find it . . .

So I stand by the door.

The most tremendous thing in the world

Is for [persons] to find that door—
the door to God.

The most important thing any [person] can do

Is to take hold of one of those blind, groping
hands,

And put it on the latch—the latch that only clicks

And opens to the [person's] own touch.

[Many] die outside that door,
as starving beggars die

On cold nights in cruel cities
in the dead of winter—

Die for want of what is within their grasp.

They live, on the other side of it—

live because they have not found it,

Nothing else matters compared to
helping them find it,

And open it, and walk in, and find him . . .

So I stand by the door.

Go in, great saints, go all the way in—

Go way down into the cavernous cellars,

And way up into the spacious attics—

It is a vast, roomy house,
this house where God is.

Go into the deepest of hidden casements,

Of withdrawal, of silence, of sainthood.

Some must inhabit those inner rooms,

And know the depth and heights of God,

And call outside to the rest of us
how wonderful it is.

Sometimes I take a deeper look in,
Sometimes venture in a little farther;
But my place seems closer to the opening . . .

So I stand by the door.

There is another reason why I stand there.
Some people get part way in and become afraid
Lest God and the zeal of his house devour them;
For God is so very great, and asks all of us.
And these people feel a cosmic claustrophobia,
And want to get out. "Let me out!" they cry.
And the people way inside only terrify them more.
Somebody must be by the door to tell them

that they are spoiled

For the old life, they have seen too much:

Once taste God, and nothing but God
will do any more.

Somebody must be watching for the frightened
Who seek to sneak out just where they came in,
To tell them how much better it is inside.

The people too far in do not see

how near these are

To leaving—preoccupied with the wonder of it all.

Somebody must watch for those who have
entered the door,

But would like to run away. So for them, too . . .

I stand by the door.

I admire the people who go way in.

But I wish they would not forget how it was
Before they got in.

Then they would be able to help

The people who have not yet even found
the door,

Or the people who want to run away again
from God.

You can go in too deeply, and stay in too long,
And forget the people outside the door.

As for me, I shall take my old accustomed place,
Near enough to God to hear him,

and know he is there,

But not so far from men as not to hear them,
And remember they are there, too.

Where? Outside the door—

Thousands of them, millions of them.

But—more important for me—

One of them, two of them, ten of them,

Whose hands I am intended to put on the latch.

So I shall stand by the door and wait

For those who seek it.

"I had rather be a door-keeper" . . .

So I stand by the door.

“One Another” Passages in the New Testament

Be devoted to and give preference
to one another.

Romans 12:10

Accept one another.

Romans 15:7

Care for one another.

1 Corinthians 12:25

Carry each other's burdens.

Galatians 6:2

Forgive one another.

Ephesians 4:32

Encourage, build one another up.

1 Thessalonians 5:11

Spur one another on to love
and good deeds.

Hebrews 10:24

Confess your sins to one another.

James 5:16

Pray for one another.

James 5:16

Serve one another.

1 Peter 4:10

Love one another.

1 John 4:11

